

Managing Large Classes: Team Teaching Approach

By Mokupe Moyosore Alimi , Bola Kassal and Taofiz Azeez

This paper attempts to define the concept of large classes with particular reference to the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta in Nigeria. It also examines the problems of large classes faced by language teachers in this university and their adoption of the team teaching approach as one of the means of overcoming some of their problems. It describes the team teaching approach and mentions briefly the Communication Skills Project for the Universities of Agriculture and Technology (COMSKIPTECH) under which the ESP methodology was introduced. From the observation gathered, this paper points out the need for improvement and also provides positive and practical recommendations towards improving the Abeokuta experiment.

The large-class phenomenon is difficult to explain because of the tendency to attribute much importance to class size. In terms of class size, what is defined as a large class varies from one teacher to another and one country to another. In spite of this, large classes are a widespread phenomenon. In the teaching of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, large classes are the norm rather than the exception. In addition to the large number of students, teachers have also had to cope with problems such as lack of basic facilities, including books and teaching equipment, poorly motivated students, and inadequate classroom environments.

At the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria (UNAAB) in 1989, there were over 300 students in the Use of English course, a two-unit service course taught to all first year students of the University. Initially, all the students were taught in a large auditorium by the only language teacher. When two others were employed, however, the students were divided between the three teachers, so each group was made up of about 125 students.

In addition to the EAP teaching hours, each of the teachers had two hours of teaching Literature in English to second year undergraduates and four hours in remedial English for the pre-degree students. The resources available, particularly books, were very limited and none of the teachers had any previous training in ESP methodology, until the inception of the Communication Skills Project for the Universities of Agriculture and Technology (COMSKIPTECH) in December 1989.

COMSKIPTECH

The COMSKIPTECH project was funded by the British government's Overseas Development Administration and jointly executed by the Nigerian National Universities Commission and the British Council. The project aims to improve teaching the communication skills of Nigerian

undergraduates through heightened teacher awareness of current ELT methodologies. At the end of the pre-project workshop led by a British consultant, in December 1989, it was obvious that large classes are not an aberration, but are a fact of our teaching experience and they require practical solutions. Each participating university was encouraged to respond positively to its situation by evolving practical solutions to cope with its particular situation, bearing in mind the need to involve the learners in the teaching and learning processes.

In order to achieve this goal at UNAAB, a needs analysis was conducted to ascertain what the students perceived as their most important needs in terms of language requirements to carry out their work effectively, and the subject teachers' perception of students' needs for effective learning in the University. The responses obtained changed our focus in course design and classroom methodology. It was realised that there is the need to evolve a strategy that will work to meet our expectations as teachers to improve our students, and the expectations of our students as learners. We were conscious, however, of the need to exercise some caution in order to avoid drastic and over-ambitious changes that could negatively affect our students. Our decision, therefore, at UNAAB was to begin to team teach using our old teaching materials which were focused on prescriptive grammar and were highly instructional, until a time when we could develop new materials that would fit our new orientation. In the meantime, we introduced into these old materials some interactive activities and tasks. During one of the workshops organised under the auspices of the project, a new set of materials on writing was produced. It was far from being perfect; however, we decided to revise, and trial it in our classes. The new set of materials is made up of nine units: awareness raising, note-taking, listening comprehension, and examinations questions. The other five units were aimed at process writing. Each student had to pay for his own copy, so it actually became a workbook both for the teachers and the students. In this paper our aim is to present our experiment in team teaching, our observations, and our efforts to improve on this methodology.

Team Teaching

Team teaching may be explained as any form of collaboration between two or more teachers in order to improve classroom teaching/management to enhance learning. Noli (1980) suggests team teaching as one of the strategies for managing large classes. This might involve two teachers "pooling classes and talents to organize different teaching activities." Gee et. al. (1984) report on their experiment in collaborative teaching with subject specialists to improve the language proficiency of overseas engineering undergraduates. In one of their results, it was reported that overseas students obtained average marks almost 5% higher than the remainder of the class. Dudley-Evans (1984) discusses a similar study in ESP. The list of the writing tasks to be covered in this instance was drawn up by the subject teachers involved, in consultation with the language teachers. He concluded that the need for team teaching is stronger in the pre-experience ESP course. De Escorcia (1984) reports that students' demand for more relevance in English courses led to the idea of a team teaching approach. This, he says, is in spite of the fact that the immediate relevance of the use of English is not manifested. Strong demands to read references in English are not always made by students.

In EAP team teaching has become a familiar approach, though used in a variety of forms. Our modification of the team teaching approach in UNAAB is summarised as follows: All three language teachers attend classes together. While one person teaches and initiates group discussions, the other two assist to ensure that students carry out tasks assigned to them, and that each group, where group work is involved, participates fully. The other teachers, who for this purpose may be referred to as teaching assistants, also observe the response of the students to the session being taught. It is important to note that all three language teachers make conscious efforts to be conversant with each unit of the teaching materials. So, it is difficult for the students to predict whose turn it is to teach at any point in time. This is particularly useful in our situation where the status of the teacher affects the psyche of the students. Teachers who have stayed longer on the job are accorded more respect. Such teachers also appear more predisposed to manage the students effectively and exercise more control in class. In UNAAB two of the teachers were new and the third was one of the pioneering staff of the university. While one person teaches the others are able to observe students' responses in class to know what aspects of the unit the students find interesting or difficult and how long it took to explain the different aspects of the lesson.

From such observations we realised that Unit One of our teaching material, "Awareness Raising," had too many tasks which none of us could effectively cover in the two hours allotted to the Unit. In Unit Two, "Note Taking," each of the two observers noted individually that the students were very inactive in class. We came to the conclusion that the Unit needed to be reviewed since the sessions were more of the "teacher talk" type. While observing the teaching sessions, we also came to an agreement in terms of some rubrics that needed to be reworded, and some tasks that had to be modified since what was required of the students was not explicitly stated in the instructions. In Unit Six, "Writing a First Draft" for example, one task required students to describe information presented in a tabular form. From the students' responses, we found that the rubric was not only too general, but that the table itself was rather confusing. Sitting in class, therefore, afforded us the opportunity of looking at our teaching materials as students and not as teachers. We were able to overcome the observed problems in the teaching material by removing some tasks, merging some tasks, rewriting instructions, and removing a unit.

At the beginning of our experiment, it was not unusual for whoever taught a particular session to ask from the two observers, "How did I perform in class," or "How did the class go?" All these observations were collated using an evaluation sheet adapted from the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Reading, and used as input for the revision of the teaching materials. At the informal meetings of the three teachers held at the end of each unit, observations relating to each teacher's performance were discussed to improve subsequent teaching sessions.

Observation

From an oral interview with twenty students, 60% confirmed that they enjoyed and preferred the new teaching methodology to the old one. Five others, representing 25%, admitted initial reluctance to participate in group work, but gradually accepted this approach as it afforded them

the opportunity to express themselves freely. These confirmed our own observations, as we noticed that students who failed in previous academic sessions, repeating the course, participated more in class discussions during the first few weeks than the new students. In our opinion this is one of the learning strategies that our students have adopted for coping with large classes.

We have made modest changes in classroom methodology and teaching materials and these changes have yielded some positive results in the classroom performance (of our students). Our test materials need to be redesigned to suit our new orientation as reflected from the examination results in 1990 and 1991. In 1989, prior to the inception of the project, out of the 367 candidates who sat for the examinations in Use of English, only 6% failed the course, while in 1990 out of the 382 candidates who sat for the examinations, 14% failed the course. In 1991, for the first semester, out of 93 who wrote the examinations, 31% failed and in the second semester out of 273, 19% failed the course. This, we think, might be attributed to the variance between teaching materials and test items. Hence, we have accepted the challenge of redesigning test and examination items.

We realise that our goal is not just the acquisition and recall of materials learned, but the application of acquired knowledge to problem solving. This we have witnessed on two occasions when some of the students we taught in their first year had requested us to read their Industrial Training Report. Some subject teachers had testified to the fact that a handful of the students in their final year had written very good reports and dissertations. This we consider must be a result of transfer of learning.

One other implication of our team teaching approach is that each of us normally carries more than the official teaching hours. This was initially burdensome. We have, however, been encouraged by our students' responses and motivation. Some of our colleagues in the subject areas are surprised and challenged by our resolve in spite of the extra hours involved and wish they could introduce team teaching in their classes.

We have also received from the subject teachers some positive reports on the students, particularly in their second year regarding their performance on examinations. One lecturer from the Department of Biological Sciences confirmed that the students' writing has improved appreciably over the years. This improvement he says is attributed to the COMSKIPTECH project.

Some subject teachers in two departments, namely, Food Science and Technology, and Agricultural Extension and Rural Development, are also willing to involve language teachers in collaborative supervision of students' projects and industrial training reports. This we consider a good research potential which we hope to exploit in the near future.

Conclusion

One of the strategies that language teachers at UNAAB have adopted in dealing with large classes is team teaching. In this paper we have discussed some of the benefits of the methodology with respect to our students. As teachers, we have also benefited tremendously

from our team teaching experiment; team teaching and teacher training/development form the basis of a future report.

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Mokupe Moyosore Alimi is the head of the General Studies Department at the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria.

Bola Kassal is a lecturer in the Department of General Studies, University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria.

Taofiz Azeez teaches at the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria.

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